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## The Discursive Paradox of Environmental Conflict: Between Ecologism and Economism in Ecuador

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**Abstract** Ecuador in times of the Rafael Correa government constitutes a prime example of the paradox of environmental conflict, in which all involved actors claim to represent the true vanguard concerning safeguarding of the environment and human conditions. The country presents the ecologically most progressive constitution in the world and also incorporates far-reaching recognition of indigenous peoples' rights. Notwithstanding, the economy remains reliant on extractivism and the government argues that the revenues of extractive industries benefit the common good. Anchored in a distinction between environmentalism and ecologism, this article identifies and problematizes dominant narratives among the actors of the contentious discursive scenarios, and analyses how the state and its ecological-indigenous opposition aim to position themselves within the political conflict. The central questions are: *How are eco-progressive politics perceived, defined and expressed in this setting of an intercultural and plurinational society economically reliant on natural resource extraction? Which values, interests and ontological assumptions are at stake and how are these expressed in the discursive struggle?* The research is based on several years of ethnographic fieldwork, combined with critical reading of the previous literature and discourse analysis. The article contributes to politico-environmental debates in Ecuador and beyond and shows that environmental struggle is entangled in broader political disputes conditioned by global economic structures. It likewise communicates with debates on argumentative discourse and illustrates that the same core arguments can constitute the argumentative basis of rivaling actors in political struggles, thus emphasizing the centrality of the contextual framing amid ontological divides in contentious discursive settings.

**Keywords:** resource governance; ecologism-environmentalism; politico-environmental conflict; argumentative discourse analysis; human–nature–society ontologies; Sumak Kawsay; Ecuador

### Introduction

... [T]he new environmental conflict, where everybody agrees that the issue of environmental decline deserves more attention but policies do not match social expectations.

The political conflict is hidden in the question of what definition is given to the problem, which aspects of social reality are included and which are left undiscussed. (Hajer, 1997, p. 43)

In the context of the mainstreamization of environmental struggle around the world and the close-to consensus on mitigation and green adaptation of the capitalist system around agreements such as the Brundtland report of 1987, this article examines a radical case in the global South of how to approach the climate crisis and similarly deal with the challenge of social justice. While Ecuador presents the world's most far-reaching constitutional protection of nature and the environment since 2008, recent events illustrate the contentious character of the environmental debate in Ecuador and of the complexity of implementing eco-progressive reforms in a country still burdened by relatively high indexes of poverty.

This case study deals with the contentious environmental politics of Ecuador in times of the 'progressive government' of Rafael Correa (2007–2017) and with a principal analytical scope on the discourses produced by actors involved in environmental conflicts. *How are (progressive) environmental politics and ecological concerns perceived, defined and expressed among involved actors? Which values, interests and ontological assumptions are at stake and how are these expressed in the discursive struggle?*

The ecological profile of Ecuador arose globally in 2007 through its Yasuní-ITT initiative to leave the country's biggest proven oil reserves untouched in this part of the Amazonia. The new government's environmentally and socially progressive reputation was further strengthened with the new constitution of 2008, which granted specific rights to nature and incorporated the indigenous ethical and philosophical conception of *Sumak Kawsay*<sup>1</sup> on the harmonious human–nature relationship among its core principles. Moreover, the 2008 constitution recognized ethnically defined grievances, such as territorial autonomy and collective rights, and declaring the state to be intercultural and plurinational.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, as elsewhere in Latin America and beyond, the (*de jure*) rights on paper do not always match the (*de facto*) rights in practice (Kröger and Lalander, 2016). The reliance on extractive activities has characterized Ecuador's economic development policies also after the establishment of the progressive constitution, and the Yasuní initiative was dismantled in 2013. The promises of safeguarding nature and indigenous territories have consequently clashed with extractive economic policies.

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1 *Sumak Kawsay* (Kichwa) or *Buen-vivir* (Spanish) could roughly be interpreted to *Good Life* or *living well in harmony with nature and among human beings*

2 The constitution of Ecuador (2008) and similarly that of Bolivia (2009) are strongly inspired by the ILO (International Labor Organization) Convention 169 on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples (1989) and the United Nations declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples (2007). The plurinational trait of the state refers to recognition of indigenous traditions in their way of organizing and identifying as peoples, nations and nationalities, although still within the boundaries of the national state.

Since several years, the harshest opposition to the Correa government has been that of ecologically concerned organizations, frequently merged with the indigenous confederation CONAIE (*Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador*), that is, organizations that previously supported the government. This is a prime example of the paradox of environmental conflict, where both sides of the conflict express environmental concerns, while apparently disagreeing on the foundations of these anxieties.

This article specifically identifies and problematizes dominating story-lines among the actors of the concerned contentious discursive scenarios, and likewise analyses how state authorities and their opponents seek to position themselves towards the other regarding extractivism and ecological concerns. Drawing on argumentative discourse theory (Dryzek, 2013; Hajer, 1997) and Andrew Dobson's distinction between ecologism and environmentalism (2007), we analyse the environmental discourses of the government and the opposition and the interpretative frameworks – or story-lines – on which they rely in their interpretation of the environmental politics and how different actors of the political conflict seek to position themselves in relation to the other. The degree of democratic atmosphere of the debate will equally be analytically considered, theoretically leaning on Iris Marion Young and her work on activist challenges of deliberative democracy (2001).

We consider three central dichotomies to characterize and analyse the discourses of the Ecuadorian environmental conflicts:

1. Environmentalism – Ecologism;
2. Anthropocentrism – post-anthropocentrism; and
3. Cultural/Ethnic rights – socio-economic rights (welfare reforms).

These simplified and interrelated dichotomies represent different standpoints on the ideological foundations towards environmental politics. Evidently, the first two dichotomies are very much interrelated and the post-anthropocentric vision is indeed a central argument in the ecologist discourse, compared to the anthropocentric environmentalist standpoint.

Our article contributes to the discussions on environmental politics in Ecuador and beyond and demonstrates that environmental struggle is entangled in wider political disputes and constrained by global economic realities. It likewise communicates with argumentative discourse theory debates and shows that the same core arguments can constitute the argumentative basis for rivalling actors in a political conflict, and thus emphasizes the centrality of the chosen contextual frameworks in discursive struggles and political agenda-setting.

We should clarify, though, that *the aim is not* to systematically and meticulously examine the environmental discourses of all involved actors, but instead to refer to illustrative examples among the contentious Ecuadorian politico-environmental debate. We should likewise make clear that the ambition *is not* to sort out all the epistemological, ontological and political complexities of the *Buen-vivir-Sumak Kawsay*

debate. However, some interpretations on behalf of the actors will be included amidst the central research inquiries regarding the contentious politico-environmental debate.

A few conceptual clarifications are required. In this study, extractivism refers principally to the mining and hydrocarbon sectors, although a broader and more precise definition of extractivism is: ‘... the kind of large volume and high-intensity natural resource extraction, mainly aimed for export as raw material without or with minimal processing’ (Gudynas, 2015, p. 13). By *economism*, we refer to the central rationalities of capitalist ideology, which commonly evolve beyond the political and democratic spheres (e.g. Teivainen, 2002). In relation to Dobson’s ecologism-environmentalism distinction, we focus on the environmentalist form of economism, i.e. the ‘greener’ approach to economic development, albeit still obeying the logics of capitalism.

The study is based on critical reading of the previous academic literature and extensive fieldwork, with around 300 semi-structured and open-ended interviews carried through in Ecuador between 2009 and 2016, with both advocates and opponents of the government’s extractivist policies and environmental ventures.<sup>3</sup> The research likewise includes analysis of public speeches and data gathered through participatory observation. Most of the interviews used for this article were realized between 2013 and 2016, i.e. after the closure of the Yasuní-ITT initiative. The interviewees were identified and contacted through the researchers’ prior networks and the key organizations of the study (mainly the indigenous and environmental movements). Sometimes, government representatives were somewhat reluctant to give interviews. Therefore, the analysis of the government’s discourse also relies on public speeches, newspaper articles and material published at government webpages. Our central criteria behind the final selection of interviews to include in the article were to present representative spokespersons of the three groups (state authorities and the indigenous and environmental movements) and among these to sort out those that most clearly contributed to the analytical problematization of our research questions. In the reconstruction of the discourses, we focused mainly on the identified discursive narratives/story-lines of the actors and Dryzek’s four basic elements provided for the analysis of environmental discourses, which will be presented below.

The disposition of the text is as follows. First, two theoretical sections are presented, on argumentative discourse and the ecologism-environmentalism dichotomy, respectively; next, a brief mapping of the historical background, focusing mainly on the indigenous and ecologist movements. The subsequent two sections form the contextual point of departure, highlighting central politico-environmental changes in times of

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3 Only a few of these interviews are mentioned in the article. We should mention that this specific article is part of the broader long-term research project of Lalander entitled *Rights of Nature – Nature of Rights. Neo-Constitutionalism and Ethno-Ecologist Resistance in Bolivia and Ecuador*, supported by the Swedish Research Council Formas for the period 2013–2016. Likewise, the article is part of the doctoral thesis project of Merimaa on environmental politics and discourse in Ecuador, to be presented at the University of Helsinki.

Correa, also including a first problematization of *Buen-vivir/Sumak Kawsay*. The following two sections analyse more closely how the Ecuadorian paradox of environmental conflict is expressed among the actors, and finally some pertinent concluding remarks are offered.

### **Argumentative discourse theory and deliberative democracy**

Competing actors construct the social and political definitions of environmental problems, usually in politically biased discourses. For Maarten Hajer, discourses are ‘specific ensemble of ideas and concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities’ (1997, p. 44). The central elements of his argumentative discourse theoretical approach are:

1. The active role of subjects in (re) production and transformation of the discourses.
2. The understanding of political conflicts as argumentative struggles where different actors seek to position themselves in relation to the other and transform the discourses to gain support for their way of seeing things (Hajer, 1997, pp. 42–69).

In conflictive settings – for instance around extractive industries and the rights of nature and the affected indigenous peoples – the characteristics of ecological phenomena are accordingly subjectively shaped by the people involved in the conflict.

A central element of Hajer’s theorization is the concept of story-lines. He defines them as ‘a generative sort of narrative that allows actors to draw upon various discursive categories to give meaning to specific physical or social phenomena’ (Hajer, 1997, p. 56, see also Dryzek, 2013, p. 17). Story-lines reduce the discursive complexity of problems, allowing actors to expand their competence beyond their actual understanding of the phenomena, thereby creating possibilities for problem closure (Hajer, 1997, pp. 52–69). John Dryzek emphasizes the following elements for the analysis of environmental discourse:

- (1) Basic entities recognized or constructed;
- (2) Assumptions on natural relationships;
- (3) Agents and their motives; and
- (4) Key metaphors and other rhetorical devices.

The first element of basic entities deals with discursive ontologies, for instance, distinctive views on ecosystems, human beings or the role of governments. The second point relates to the conception of natural relationships in different discourses, for example concerning ecological and/or human social systems. The third element on actors and their motives refers to the creators of discursive story-lines and their causes of action. The fourth element on metaphors and rhetorical devices is equally important in this article,

such as identifying nature as a woman (Mother Earth/*Pachamama*)<sup>4</sup> and to the references of specific human and non-human rights (Dryzek, 2013, pp. 17–21).

Both Dryzek and Hajer have theorized the above themes in broader terms of deliberative or discursive democracy. In this essay, the description and analysis of the context and relative degree of democratic atmosphere of the environmental debate is highly significant and therefore a few lines on the liaison between democratic deliberation and discourse are required. In Young's example (2001), two characters – the deliberative democrat and the activist – face each other in an unequal relationship in which the former represents the state authority and the latter the oppositional activist. In its ideal scenario, this liaison would express a constructive deliberative debate, characterized by respect and understanding for one another and with the aim of reaching consensus on a situation to be resolved. However, in real-life settings the characteristics of the relation and the discursive atmosphere rather reflect distrust, anger and frustration on behalf of the activist and ignorance, stultification of the other on behalf of the state (Young, 2001). Young's argumentative logics to portray the democratic-discursive atmosphere are highly relevant for the Ecuadorian environmental paradox.

### Ecologism versus environmentalism

The actors involved in the Ecuadorian environmental conflict frame their discourses around distinctive worldviews and comprehensions of human–nature values and relationships. The discursive battle frequently revolves around the conceptualization of *Buen-vivir/Sumak Kawsay*, and the interpretative differences of *Sumak Kawsay* can be framed theoretically by contrasting different conceptions of ecologism and environmentalism.

Many years before the approval of the eco-progressive Ecuadorian constitution, Andrew Dobson discussed theoretical models of *Good Life* from ecologist viewpoints. The first sentence in the preface of the fourth edition of his classic *Green Political Thought* (2007) was: '*We are all environmentalists now – or are we?*' Dobson – who identifies as (radical) ecologist himself – argues that environmentalism (which is the dominant position in the world) should not be confused with ecologism; the two concepts have different ideological meanings:

Environmentalism argues for a managerial approach to environmental problems, secure in the belief that they can be solved without fundamental changes in present values or patterns of production and consumption;

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4 To clarify, not all nature is female, but all components of nature and cosmos are gendered. Earth/soil is female, rain is male, sun is male, moon female, river is male, lake is female, etc. Those that are dynamic and moving, i.e. 'fertilizing', are male, and those that are stable/stagnant and reproducing life are female. So, the gendered references to nature should of course not only be viewed as rhetorical devices or metaphors. They express peoples' belief systems and worldviews.



Ecologism holds that a sustainable and fulfilling existence presupposes radical changes in our relationship with the nonhuman natural world, and in our mode of social and political life. (Dobson, 2007, pp. 2–3)

Ecologism for Dobson refers to a more radical ecocentric approach, whereas environmentalism is pragmatic and anthropocentric. Following Robyn Eckersley, whereas the ecocentric (radical ecologist) line sees nature as ‘sacred’ and endorses the idea of zero extractivism, the more pragmatic attitude asserts that ecocentrism is too rigid, inflexible and unresponsive regarding different moral and cultural situations. Environmental pragmatists claim to be more effective in practical environmental problem-solving, less biased concerning cultural diversity and moral pluralism, and also more democratic regarding its reasoning of environmental policy deliberation by concerned actors. The ecocentric advocates, in contrast, can argue that the pragmatic justification of moral pluralism leads to indecisive relativism (Eckersley, 2002). Since human beings are the only ones that can debate values, environmental pragmatism is anthropocentric, simply because the human viewpoint is the only one we can really comprehend. The best thing humans could do in this sense is to be the spokespersons of the other non-human beings, in the words of environmental philosopher Parker (1996, p. 33).

Anthropocentrism maintains that value is *of* or *for* human beings. Biocentrism maintains that all forms of life, as such, are valuable. Ecocentrism emphasizes the value of ecological systems as a whole, including natural processes, relationships and non-living parts of the environment. An aspect of this debate concerns whether value attaches to individual entities or whether value must be seen holistically. (Parker, 1996, p. 32)

In practice, though, it is often problematic to draw a precise boundary between anthropocentrism/pragmatism and ecocentrism. The ecological concerns of an environmental pragmatist may certainly be genuine, but in political situations other values related to human needs, i.e. poverty reduction and provision of welfare, might be more demanding in the short-term perspective of political leadership.

Since the 1980s, with the emergence of *ecological modernization theory* as a dominant tendency among environmental scholars and politicians, the conditions of the debate on climate and ecological issues have changed a lot, including the relative position of environmental organizations. Ecological modernization refers to restructuring of the capitalist society on more environmentally sustainable ground, and it is based on a strong faith of the capacity of technologies and the markets in resolving ecological challenges (Dryzek, 2013; Hajer, 1997; Mol and Spaargaren, 2000).

Environmental discourses accordingly became part of common political discourses; except for some populist groups and climate deniers, practically everyone claims to be ‘ecologically concerned’. Liberal and conservative scholars and politicians incorporated environmental concern in their agendas, thus indirectly affecting the degree of radicalness of the historical environmental and ecologist movements. In addition, the historical left experienced a greening process since the 1980s, with the rise of

eco-Marxism or eco-socialism, a kind of fusion of the red and green socio-political movements.<sup>5</sup> The political-ideological boundaries between Liberals, Right, Green and Left were consequently blurred from the angle of environmental issues.

Both ecological modernization and eco-socialism are anthropocentric in their approach towards nature. Ecological modernization scholars hold that radical ecologists constantly give undisputed priority to environmental concerns before other social aims (Mol and Spaargaren, 2000, pp. 36–37).<sup>6</sup> Concerning eco-socialism, authors such as Michael Löwy highlight national social inequality and North–South inequalities as central obstacles in the struggle towards more environmental-friendly societies:

The struggle against the commodification of the world and the defence of the environment, resistance to the dictatorship of multinationals, and the battle for ecology are intimately linked in the reflection and praxis of the world movement against capitalist/liberal globalization. (Löwy, 2005, p. 24)

Löwy's words accordingly connect to the Ecuadorian case, where different discursive approaches towards nature, the economy, societal values and global capitalism intersect and collide. Although the conflict is apparent about natural conservation and human–nature–society relationships, the discourses expand to include broader issues, such as global capitalism, social rights and the position of ethno-cultural minorities in a poverty-ridden country, albeit rich in natural resources.

### Environmental resistance context

Oil has been at the core of the Ecuadorian economy and state politics since the late 1960s. Only Brazil and Venezuela have larger oil reserves in South America. During the period 1972–1990, the Texaco oil corporation in concession with the Ecuadorian state oil company *Petroecuador* extracted more than two billions of barrels of oil from the Amazon, with vast social, economic and ecological repercussions (Lewis, 2016, pp. 31–33). Even though Ecuador established the protection of some national parks during the neoliberal era of the 1980s and early 1990s – in exchange for a reduction of its foreign debt (Meyer, 1993) – generally, there was minimal attention to environmental concerns on behalf of the state (Lewis, 2016).

The environmental movement of Ecuador emerged in the late 1970s, i.e. shortly before the return to democracy in 1979, although it achieved a relatively important role in politics only a decade later. According to recent estimates, there are over

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5 Of course, there are differing degrees of radicalness and red-green proportionality among eco-socialist actors and some are evidently closer to post-anthropocentrism and ecologism than to environmentalist economism.

6 These western conceptualizations should of course be applied cautiously, considering that many rural indigenous communities depend on nature for their livelihood and also that natural landscapes also carry social and religious meanings among the indigenous peoples.

200 environmental groups in Ecuador (Lewis, 2016). Reconnecting to the ecologism-environmentalism dichotomy, the environmental sociologist Tammy Lewis makes a comparable typology in reference to the different kinds of Ecuadorian environmental organizations. In the first place, like Dobson she divides them into *ambientalistas* (environmentalists) and *ecologistas* (ecologists). Lewis also offers the following four sub-categories of environmental/ecologist organizations (of which roughly the first two could be labelled environmentalist and the second two more ecologist):

- (1) Ecoimperialists (transnational actors/funders including INGOs (International Non-Governmental Organizations), with headquarters in the Global North. For example: *USAID* and *The Nature Conservancy/TNC*);
- (2) Ecodependents (Ecuadorian organizations dependent on and at least 50 per cent financed by Ecoimperialists. For instance, *Fundación Natura*);
- (3) Ecoresisters (local, regional or national organization with little or no ecoimperialist funding. For example: *Acción Ecológica* and *DECOIN (Defence and Ecological Conservation of Intag)*);
- (4) Ecoentrepreneurs (local self-funded organizations. Example: *Fund for the Protection of Water/FONAG*) (Lewis, 2016, pp. 43–54).

The advancements of the environmental organizations coincided with the increased importance of the indigenous movement since the mid-1980s. The *Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador/CONAIE* was created in 1986, and in the 1990s the indigenous movement, spearheaded by CONAIE, and since 1995 its electoral movement Pachakutik, became the most important oppositional force in Ecuador for several years. During the indigenous mobilizations of the 1990s, the ecological concerns constituted a core theme amidst the demands for social justice and recognition of the peoples and their access to land.

All over Latin America, the discourses of environmental and indigenous organizations respectively experienced a kind of fusion, since these actors had many objectives in common. As argued by Astrid Ulloa, the ecologist feature in the political discourse of several indigenous organizations was strategically constructed through (national and) transnational networks (Ulloa, 2005). Through ecologism, they were able to promote their key priorities: demands for lands and territories and territorial autonomy/self-governance. Because ecologism was the language Westerners understood, whereas if they had spoken of ancestor spirits, transnational support had not been that widely spread.

### **The greening of Ecuadorian politics**

Economist and radical Catholic Rafael Correa triumphed in the presidential elections of 2006, with the alliance *Movimiento Alianza PAIS (Patria Altiva y Soberana/Proud and Sovereign Fatherland)*. The political programme of PAIS was practically copied from the Indigenous and ecologist movements' agendas. During the first years of the Correa

administration, the country's social indicators regarding poverty index, employment and health improved rapidly (Becker, 2013). Simultaneously, these years marked a change in governance; people from grassroots movements were incorporated into ministries and communication between civil society and the state was enhanced.

The new environmental governance relies on scientific knowledge and the administrative staff consists of experts frequently trained at foreign universities, while it also strives for enhancing opportunities of sub-national governmental entities. Since 2008, active environmental remediation policies have advanced through the Reparation Program of Environmental and Social Liabilities/PRAS (Andrade, 2016, p. 127). Arsel (2012) maintains that the transformation towards post-neoliberal order promised by the government has been most clearly advanced in the sphere of environmental policies.

Ecological themes were thus integrated into state politics, not only through the new constitution, but also through the Yasuní-ITT<sup>7</sup> initiative. Already in 2007, this groundbreaking initiative was established to keep the country's biggest proven oil reserves underground in the indigenous territory and national park of the Amazonian Yasuní territory. The initiative was launched in collaboration with the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*. With the catchphrase of 'leaving the oil in the soil', Ecuador asked international donors for a financial compensation corresponding to 50 per cent of the estimated incomes generated from oil exploitation (co-responsibility) in order to protect the biodiversity and the indigenous peoples of the area, some of which live in voluntary isolation.<sup>8</sup>

Another interrelated novelty of the constitution was the incorporation of indigenous cosmovision and lifestyle principles, the *Buen-Vivir/Sumak Kawsay*. The systematic intellectualization of the *Sumak Kawsay* conceptualization as an alternative to the connotation of development understood as economic growth first occurred in the early 1990s, principally by the anthropologist Carlos Viteri Gualinga and his brothers of the Amazonian Kichwa-Sarayaku people. In his words:

The conception of a linear process that establishes a previous and posterior state does not exist, i.e. between sub-development and development respectively, as is the case in societies of a European framing. Neither do the concepts of wealth and poverty exist, as an axis of accumulation or lack of material belongings or access to social services. There is an integrating vision of what the mission of human ambition should be, which consists of the search and creation of material, environmental and spiritual conditions to achieve and maintain *Súmak Káusai*, which is the ideal of a 'Good way of Living' or 'harmonious life'. (Viteri Gualinga, 2003, p. iii)

Later on, non-indigenous academics, such as Alberto Acosta, who just like Viteri Gualinga would join the political project of Rafael Correa, contributed to the theoretical and

<sup>7</sup> ITT refers to three untapped oil blocks known collectively as Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini.

<sup>8</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, the initiative persisted until August 2013, when Correa declared its closure due to deficiency in international economic support. In due course, we will reconnect to the Yasuní case amidst the Ecuadorian paradox of environmental conflict.

practical debate on *Buen-Vivir/Sumak Kawsay* (e.g. Acosta, 2005) and to its inclusion in the constitution. Viteri Gualinga has chaired the Commission of Biodiversity and Natural Resources of the National Assembly for several years, representing the PAIS alliance. Acosta was minister of energy and mining in the Correa administration in 2007 and in 2008 he was the President of the National Assembly that rewrote the constitution. He was a key person in connecting Correa with ecological and indigenous organizations. However, Acosta left the Correa-PAIS movement and the presidency of the assembly in June 2008 due to disagreements with the President.

Nonetheless, already by 2006, *Buen-vivir* had a central place in the political programme of the PAIS alliance (Altmann, 2013, p. 290). The sociologist Philipp Altmann reflects on the historical complexity of *Sumak Kawsay* from the perspective of the indigenous movement:

*Sumak Kawsay* is a multiple concept, also regarding the considerable diversity of the context in which it emerged ... It is a central political concept within the general discourse of the indigenous movement. Therefore, it connects to other concepts of that discourse, such as plurinationality and interculturality ... The central idea – the harmonious and reciprocal relationship between ‘Human-Nature-Society’- ... is present in the rationalities of the indigenous movement since 1980. (Altmann, 2016, p. 58)

For Magdalena Fueres, leader of rural indigenous women of the highland *Kichwa-Otavalo* people of highland Cotacachi, the connotation of *Sumak Kawsay* fundamentally refers to communitarian values and practices of sharing and coexisting well among human and non-human beings. As she argues, there is a specific distinction between *Buen-Vivir* and *Sumak Kawsay*. Whereas *Buen-Vivir* can be understood as an economic concept, *Sumak Kawsay* denotes a more philosophical conception rooted in Kichwa values and beliefs:

*Sumak Kawsay* is to live in family, that is, the extended family and for that reason I say live in the community, in relation with nature; nutrition, animals and all living beings. I believe this is how we view *Sumak Kawsay*. At least among our indigenous peoples, the most important elements have been land, water, air and the sun, without these, we would not have life. Therefore, I always say that we have to protect these elements of life. (Fueres, interview, Comunidad La Calera, Cotacachi, 25 February 2014)

The national development plan of Ecuador in times of Correa is actually named the National Plan for the *Buen-Vivir* (Senplades, 2013). Effectively, the 2008 constitution considers that the objective of the development regime should not be economic growth or welfare, but rather *Sumak Kawsay/Buen-vivir*, as expressed somewhat vaguely in article 275:

The development structure is the organized, sustainable and dynamic group of economic, political, socio-cultural and environmental systems that underpin the achievement of the good way of living, *Sumak Kawsay*. [...] The good way of living shall require persons,

communities, peoples and nationalities to effectively exercise their rights and fulfil their responsibilities within the framework of interculturalism, respect for their diversity, and harmonious coexistence with nature (República del Ecuador, 2008).

However, the ethno- and eco-progressive constitution likewise includes a quantity of contradictions; with articles that recognize the right and obligation of the state to manage, regulate and oversee strategic sectors, among them non-renewable natural resources, albeit taking into consideration the rights of nature and of indigenous peoples and provided that revenues should be directed towards the common good (e.g. Lalander, 2014; 2016).

The specific interpretation of what *Buen-vivir/Sumak Kawsay* is or should be, for instance amidst human–nature relationships, and consequently the story-lines around *Buen-vivir/Sumak Kawsay* differ among the actors. Whereas the indigenous standpoint emphasizes the human–nature integration, radical ecologists value the rights of nature as superior to those of human beings. The (eco-)socialists, finally, consider human needs before those of nature, which in this article corresponds to the view of environmental pragmatism and the Correa government. The State generally interprets *Buen-vivir* as a human welfare model, the indigenous movement emphasizes the ethical and cultural substances of the term, and ecologist and post-developmental actors consider that *Sumak Kawsay* should imply privileging natural concerns over anthropocentric economic ones (Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo Guevara, 2014; Villalba-Eguiluz and Etxano, 2017). However, in practice there is no exact frontier between the three ‘categories’ or viewpoints (Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo Guevara, 2014; Lalander, 2014).

Altmann (2016, p. 72) argues that the state’s understanding of *Sumak Kawsay* as a critique of (neoliberal) capitalism is too narrow and lacks potential for postcolonial societal criticism. The relative gap between radical rhetoric and modest reforms has led to critical interpretations of the State’s discourse of *Buen-vivir*. Caria and Domínguez (2016) suggest that just like other ideologies, *Buen-vivir* has been used to mobilize people and create spurious consciousness serving the interests of the ruling classes and legitimizing status quo.

CONAIE and leading ecologist actors initially supported the Correa government and contributed to the elaboration of the new constitution, and many indigenous leaders and groups have continued backing and identifying with the government. Generally, however, despite their shared history, tensions and rivalry between the Correa government and the indigenous and ecologist organizations have characterized the relationship between the two and protests have occasionally lead to social clashes and violence. In addition to the expansion of the hydrocarbon sector, the ecological-indigenous opposition has protested against the plans to open the country for large-scale mining.<sup>9</sup> A common complaint among CONAIE-Pachakutik spokespersons is

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<sup>9</sup> Mining was not a strategic economic activity for the state development model prior to the Correa government, but small-scale mining including artisan mining developed in Southern Ecuador. In the 1990s, the mining sector attracted foreign corporate investors and anti-

that Correa-PAIS divided the indigenous organizations and co-opted a great number of their leaders and grassroots sympathizers. Of course, this argument could be reversed, i.e. to view the indigenous support of the government in terms of alliance-building and political persuasion (Ospina Peralta and Lalander, 2012).

Besides disagreements regarding environmental politics, Correa's moves against the *Council for the Development of Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities of Ecuador*/CODENPE and the *National Directorate for Intercultural Bilingual Education*/DINEIB added to the hostile relationship between the government and CONAIE. These two institutions had previously been controlled by CONAIE. The decisions in 2009 and 2010 to stop the funding of CODENPE and the removal of the autonomy of DINEIB were interpreted as attempts to discipline indigenous that had criticized the government's economic policies and supported the anti-mining movement (Nicholls, 2014, pp. 332–334). Correa's former minister of communications, Monica Chuji, likewise CONAIE leader and former influential deputy of the Constitutional Assembly (and cousin of the Viteri Gualinga brothers), labelled the attacks on indigenous institutions racist and claimed that Correa's ideas of development excluded indigenous people (Chuji, 2009).

In the following sections, we analyse how both the government and the opponents of extractive politics discursively seek to gain legitimacy for their claims and to position themselves in relation to the other.

### **Between ecologism and economism**

The closure of the highly praised Yasuní-ITT initiative in August 2013, and the decision to give green light for oil drilling in the largest proven petroleum reserve of the country did not arrive as a complete surprise. As observed during fieldwork in Ecuador in 2012 and 2013, several indigenous leaders, ecologists and academics argued that it was a question of time when the project would be dismantled. Whereas CONAIE and the ecologist organizations immediately reacted and mobilized against the government, a significant part of the indigenous population has manifested support of Correa and understanding of the resolution on the Yasuní-ITT.

The arguments presented by Correa were, above all, that the international community had failed them. Merely, a 0.37 per cent of estimated contributions had been achieved. Besides, there was the economic context: incomes are necessary for social reforms; to combat poverty, build schools and hospitals, etc., especially in the Amazon. Moreover, Correa maintained that over 99 per cent of Yasuní would remain intact, and only 0.1 per cent of its territory would be directly affected by the oil extraction. Additionally, Correa claimed that the oppositional ecologist activists build their discourse around a false dilemma regarding the relationship between

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mining protests against transnational corporations gradually increased (Acosta, 2009; Latorre Tomás, 2012).



nature and extractivism. ‘The reality is more complicated’ ... ‘the world does not function like that’ according to the President, and the ‘minimal environmental damage’ caused by oil drilling should be balanced with the possibilities to improve life conditions for the Amazonian people. A further argument, also valid beyond the Yasuní case, refers to the national control of the extractive industries. Following this logic, there is a crucial difference between transnational versus national extractive companies and national ones are expected to be more concerned with environmental aspects and the rights of local affected population (Correa, 2013).

Amid the socio-political turmoil around the Yasuní-ITT, an old environmental conflict was reactivated on a large scale by mid-September 2013. Rafael Correa initiated a global campaign against Chevron-Texaco (*Chevron’s dirty hand/La mano sucia de Chevron*) and held the transnational company responsible for environmental damages occurred through oil extraction in the Amazon during the period 1964–1990. In 2011, the Ecuadorian court had sentenced Chevron with a fine of 18 billion US\$ as compensation for the affected indigenous population. However, the company refused to pay and in 2013 another Ecuadorian court ordered Chevron to pay 9.5 billion US\$. Chevron denied liability and initiated a lawsuit against the Ecuadorian state accusing the national state oil company Petroecuador as main responsible for socio-environmental damages. In this sense, the Correa government is at the same time faced two frontlines of politico-environmental struggle: on the one hand applauded by ecologists in the case against Chevron, and on the other hand defending its position regarding Yasuní-ITT.

Meanwhile, the sharp decline in oil and gas prices on the world markets from fall 2014 onwards has affected the economic position of the Ecuadorian state, which is pressed to increase extractive activities, realize budget costs and achieve foreign credits. According to recent figures, China has borrowed Ecuador almost 11 billion dollars to finance infrastructure projects. Chinese companies are operating in Ecuadorian construction ventures and extractive industries (Krauss and Bradsher, 2015). Consequently, while emphasizing national control as the guarantee for socially and ecologically responsible extraction, the government also allows China to strengthen its presence in extractivist activities.

The discursive conflict also takes concrete forms at specific locations at specific moments. A recent example that has been labelled an *Ecuadorian Standing Rock* – referring to the recent pipeline conflict in North Dakota (US) – emerged on 21 November in 2016 when the indigenous Shuar people of the Nankints community of the Amazonian Morona Santiago province invaded the camp of a Chinese mining company. The Shuar spokespersons denounced the lack of consultation procedures before the entrance of the company in their territory and neither were they given any explanation on the grounds the company had been granted environmental permits (Semana56, 2017). The government responded by sending in police and military troops, resulting in violence that left two soldiers and five policemen injured, and



one policeman dead (Hill, 2017). A state of emergency was declared in the province and several local habitants were detained (Semana56, 2017).

Ecuador's leading ecological NGO and long-standing government critic, *Acción Ecológica*, publically supported the Shuar and demanded a Truth Commission. Two days later, the government requested the immediate dissolution of *Acción Ecológica*, accusing the NGO of supporting Shuar-related violence in social media (Hill, 2017). On 12 January 2017, the Government withdrew its demands for closure, but prompted that the organization should focus on its original objectives and not use social media to provoke unrest in sensitive situations (Noboa, 2017).

This was not the first time that environmental actors denounced the extensive use of force or government attempts to silence critical voices. For example, *Acción Ecológica* was threatened with dissolution already in 2009 and another environmental NGO, *Fundación Pachamamá*,<sup>10</sup> was shut down in December 2013 (Lewis, 2016, pp. 187–188). The United Nations criticized Ecuador for violating the liberty of expression, but according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the criticism was based on biased information and that 'the Ecuadorian state fully complies with its human rights commitments' (Hill, 2017).

### Who is the greenest of them all?

We are environmentalists, but not in the same sense as those naïve ones that consider human beings to be slightly less than an obstruction for nature. For us, and for the Revolution, the human being is not the only important thing, but still more important than Pachamama. We cannot be beggars sitting on a sack of gold. (Speech by Rafael Correa, 28 November 2012, Correa Delgado, 2012, pp. 17–18)

Andrew Dobson would most likely agree with the President Correa's self-identification as environmentalist – and consequently not ecologist, as 'those naïve ones' in the wording of Correa. This discourse fragment equally illustrates the discursive climate between the actors and Iris Marion Young would certainly classify the relationship between the actors as antagonistic and disrespectful, that is, with a pejorative and ridiculing description of the adversaries. At the same time, the metaphor of the sack of gold is illustrative of the resource dilemma faced by the environmentally ambitious government and the overarching framework of the logics of capitalism. Correa equally recognizes nature as a female being according to indigenous beliefs and similarly reveals the assumptions on human–nature relationships as well as the causes behind politico-economic decisions on behalf of the state. The quotation is exemplary also in showing the government's acknowledgement of environmental issues, while simultaneously contextualizing them only as one – and *not the most* important – societal question.

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10 Being a sister-filial of a US-based organization, *Fundación Pachamama* would fall into the category of ecodependents (Lewis, 2016).

Correa's frequently repeated declaration: 'I do not like mining, I do not like petroleum, but I like poverty and misery even less' (País, 2013) illustrates the government's defensive stance on the extractivist-conservation quandary. In the government discourse, extraction is not a choice but a necessity dictated by global economic structures and constraints. The government has also frequently expressed that the revenues from extractivism will be used to accomplish an economic transition from an extractivist to a knowledge economy and to detach the country from economic dependency, and thus it is precisely extractivism itself that will reverse the dependence on extractivism (Ramírez Gallegos, 2010).

Despite the incorporation of postcolonial ideas and indigenous cosmovision in the state discourse, the discourse is still far from a sincere questioning of the anthropocentric and economistic model of society. Instead, the government's ideal societal model resembles that of a European welfare state. In previous studies, this quandary has been metaphorically expressed as a 'straitjacket' for progressive governments in their challenges on how to finance welfare reforms and simultaneously deal with natural resources and environmental conservation and respect the rights of nature and the indigenous peoples in localities of extractive activities (Lalander, 2014; 2016).

Indigenous spokespersons sometimes point out the cultural normativity behind social welfare reforms and criticize the lack of cultural sensitivity and subsequent harm to the indigenous way of life. Salvador Quishpe of the Kichwa-Saraguro people is Prefect of the Morona Santiago province of the Southern Amazon and one of the central adversaries of Correa. For him:

The big question is what development means to the Chinese mining company. What's development for President Correa? What's development for the Shuar communities? What kind of development do we want? Of course, we have things in common; we need a highway, a bridge, electric energy and so on ... The problem is that they want to expand their occidental, capitalist, monetarist conceptualization ... In the Amazon, there's people without dollars but with a good standard of living, with peacefulness, harmony and happiness. So, what is poverty then? (interview, Quito, 9 December 2015)

Not all of the opposition, however, disagrees with the economic goals of the government. For example, Benito Bonilla, member of the *Yasunidos* collective, emphasizes that they are not aspiring to 'turn the clocks back' (interview, Quito, 18 March 2015), but propose what he considers a 'socially progressive and ecologically sustainable' tax reform. The *Yasunidos* (n.d.) propose a 1.5 per cent tax increase for the wealthiest Ecuadorians, which according to them in 25 years would correspond to the calculated revenues of the Yasuní petroleum reserve. This argument questions the supposedly mutually excluding elements of ecologism and social rights, and argues that these two could indeed be compatible. Moreover, ecological activists claim that with an extended temporal perspective, ecologism actually constitutes a precondition for social rights of future generations.

The indigenous oppositional discourse draws considerably on rights of different cultural ways of living and emphasizes that they should be considered at least equally important as the Western-inspired social rights. The language differs from that used by environmental organizations, which builds more on a critique of the ecologically destructive logic of capitalism. One of the most determined adversaries of the Correa government is Marlon Santi of the Amazonian Sarayaku people, national coordinator of Pachakutik since 2016 and previously President of CONAIE (2008-2011). In 2009, he declared the following:

The development proposed by the national government is an aggressive development that fails to view Mother Earth as a space of life, or a space that generates life ... We promote an alternative and progressive development that respects the rights of the environment, of human beings and of nature. The government, or the economic power, does not understand the model of life that the indigenous movement has launched regarding our spaces of life where also the majority of natural wealth is to be found, such as water, oil and minerals. (Santi, interview, Riobamba, 2 July 2009)

The indigenous-ecologist opposition argues that the sustainable economic solution should not be extraction that only provides short term, poorly paid work for a few and with heavy socio-environmental costs. Instead, they propose developing local-level alternatives, such as eco-tourism or biodynamic farming. At least on a shorter term horizon, though, these activities would hardly substitute the importance of extractivism for the national economy. However, it is exactly the short-term vision that is criticized by the opposition. According to them, the long-term costs of ecological degradation would be far greater than the estimated economic benefits. One of the leading ecologist activists in this struggle is Esperanza Martínez of *Acción Ecológica*. In her words:

How can they say that there are no alternatives? On local level there are plenty, and these alternatives should be valorized. Many beautiful things are created on local level, like for example in Intag. The people are proud of what they do and they have the most precious *Sumak Kawsay*. *Sumak Kawsay* does not mean living like the industrialized societies; it means living in harmony with the community and with other horizons of consumption. (Martínez, interview, Quito, 11 May 2015)

The discourses of the indigenous and the ecologist movements accordingly overlap and reinforce each other. For the ecological organizations, safeguarding the environment is also a question of respecting the rights of indigenous peoples (as guardians of the forest and the biodiversity), since rural indigenous communities tend to be most affected by extractivism.

Reconnecting to the problematization of the connotation of *Buen-vivir-Sumak Kawsay*, an apparent decline in the allusions to the concept in government discourses has occurred from 2010 onwards. In a recent interview, Carlos Viteri Gualinga of the

Sarayaku *Kichwa-Amazonian* people, who in the 1990s intellectualized *Sumak Kawsay*, reflects retrospectively on the interpretations of the concept:

Well, they translated *Sumak Kawsay* into *Buen-vivir* but I feel that this is very simplistic and sounds very simple because it lacks substance. It seems as if everybody understands the significance of *Buen-vivir* in its broadest dimension. The *Sumak Kawsay* model is established as a necessity to advance towards a cultural change as society and state ... One way of expressing this is the concept of sustainable life, in which human culture and human beings organize activities and the economy through respectful interaction. I believe we have to understand this as an interaction, both between human beings [and nature]. Among human beings we need to promote a respectful and equitable system of interaction. (Viteri-Gualinga, interview, Quito, 1 August 2016)

The key author of the National *Buen-Vivir* Plan, René Ramírez, recently admitted the partial failure of this project of societal transformation:

The significance of *Buen-vivir* has been prostituted ... The concept goes beyond the perspectives of development and welfare ... because it aims at other kinds of societal construction and meanings, based on other values and principles. Therefore it has been insufficient ... It is necessary to rethink the model of redistribution. Consequently we require distinct types of economic organization and of property. (Telégrafo, 2016)

The ecologist movement, such as the *Yasunidos*, employs the *Sumak Kawsay* discourse and story-line, for instance with the slogan of ‘*Sumak Kawsay* is without Oil’ (e.g. Martínez, 2013). Or, as argued by Carlos Zorrilla, historical leader of the environmental organization DECOIN that struggles against mining in the Intag zone of the Northern highlands:

Whether *Sumak Kawsay* is an alternative vision only to capitalism is open to debate but ... I am sure most indigenous cultures would agree with the concept’s anti-capitalist and anti-extractivism connotations ... More and more the *Sumak Kawsay* is being taken up by both indigenous and non-indigenous communities who are defending their rights against the onslaught of extractivism ... Simply expressed: how can a government guarantee the people’s right to *Sumak Kawsay* if the projects it promotes endangers the fundamental principles of the concept? (Zorrilla, 2014)

Now, regarding the democratic and discursive atmosphere of the politico-environmental debate, the opponents of extractivism back their argumentation with international references to ecological disasters related to extractivist activities, usually with a hostile and mistrusting tone towards the government. The commonly antagonistic and pejorative character of the government’s discourse was apparent already in 2007, as articulated by the President:

We have always said that one of the major threats is the infantile leftism and ecologism. As previously stated, with their insensate attitudes on oil moratorium, prohibition of the exploitation of petroleum in national parks – when the entire country should be declared a

national park – or the prohibition of open-pit mining without benefit of inventory. (Correa 2007 quoted in Ospina Peralta and Lalander, 2012, p. 121)

From another perspective, this ‘infantilism’ can be considered as a struggle where there is an entire way of life at stake. Patricia Gualinga of the Kichwa-Sarayaku people is among the most prominent front-runners in the ecologist-indigenous movement. She represents the *Kawsak Sacha* (Living Forest) project, which is an indigenous proposal to defy Climate Change, and clarifies:

We are not really opposition. We are peoples that reclaim that the respect of the rights of the indigenous peoples ... We are completely against the idea that capitalists come here with their extractive industry, so destructive for the cosmovision of the indigenous peoples and for the environment, despite their promises of top technology. Puyo is an example, but also in the Shuar territory, parts of Sarayaku, parts of the Shiwas and the list continues. It's not only the Yasuní ... Our objective is to keep this (the Amazonia) intact and construct an alternative that is not completely excluded from the occidental world, because that would be impossible, but still based on our sustainability and cosmology, although perhaps with some positive elements from the Western world. However, this must be without losing our indigenous vision and essence and not only in theory. Because otherwise we'll end up in conflicts, cousins against cousins, families against families. (Interview, Puyo, 11 February 2015)

During interviews with people devoted to the government, frequently the interviewees recommended the researcher to focus on the political and economic connections of their adversaries and scrutinize where their funds came from. These accusations resonate with the history of environmental movements in Ecuador, which particularly during the 1980s and 1990s were funded largely by foreign donors, whose interests directed the focus of environmental actors. The allegations of ecoimperialists and ecodependents in terms of Lewis (2016) thus persist in Ecuador. Segundo Fuentes, environmental engineer of Kichwa-Otavalo origin, has held leading positions for nine years at the regional level of the Environmental Ministry.

There's a lot of people who make their living on the environmental theme, and these people are not even environmentalists. There are external interests at stake, and these people are directed from outside Ecuador. When dwelling into these themes, it is always necessary to visualize who the actors are and where their funds come from. (Interview, Ibarra, 8 April 2015)

In the discourses of state authorities, principally President Correa, the opponents of extraction are referred to either as naïve idealists who lack the understanding of economic realities or as supporters of the political right disguised as leftists or agents serving the interests of foreign nations. These attacks have not remained merely discursive, the ecologist activists have at times been labelled terrorists by the government, including with measures to criminalize protests.

The disrespectful, suspicious and pejorative tone of argumentation, however, is not the exclusive privilege of the government. The ecologist-indigenous opposition frequently labels Correa a ‘neoliberal in disguise’. The argument is that the current extractive model’s only difference in regard to the exploitation exercised by transnational companies is that the material goods offer previously as compensation for destruction of land and livelihoods of rural communities have now been replaced by promises of education and hospitals. In the words of Eduardo Pichilingue, former functionary of the Ministry of Environment and now a member of Yasunidos:

A sacrifice that big cannot be requested from such weak sectors in such an economically unequal country as Ecuador ... Previously transnational petroleum companies used commodities, such as electricity, as means of exchange with local communities. The government is doing the same, only that now they are offering hospitals and schools instead of TV’s and refrigerators. (Interview, Quito, 15 April, 2015)

Regardless, the discourses also share many common points between the three groups. Pedro de la Cruz of the Kichwa-Otavallo Indigenous nationality is a leader of the socialist peasant-indigenous organization FENOCIN (*Confederación Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas, Indígenas y Negras*/National Confederation of Peasant, Indigenous and Black Organizations). Since 2006, he has represented the Correa administration and held several important posts, including as a deputy in the assembly that rewrote the constitution. While referring to indigenous ontologies, he exposes the following rather pragmatic thoughts concerning the ethical quandaries of resource governance and human–nature relations:

We have wealth in nature, but for which purpose? Should we always keep it in Pachamama’s belly or should we use it to fix the lack of basic facilities, of education, health and move towards equilibrium in terms of a redistribution of wealth? It’s a dilemma, as you say. We respect Pachamama, but how to use or not to use her resources? Therefore, what we say is that we need to use the resources of Pachamama with responsibility. (Interview, Quito, 12 March 2015)

The different conflicts between the government and the indigenous movement are interconnected, and beyond the concerns about nature and the climate, environmental debates and conflicts are closely linked to issues of indigenous rights, worldviews and livelihoods, as well of questions of ethnically and culturally defined territoriality. The discourses include a critique of the dominant societal model based on modernist European ideals and demand recognition and respect for other ways of life based on different beliefs and understandings of nature–society liaisons.

### **Paradox of environmental conflict**

Reconnecting to the fundamental elements of environmental discourses, as presented by Dryzek (2013, pp. 17–21), all these have hitherto been directly or indirectly touched upon. The first element dealt with the discursive ontologies, expressed, for

instance, regarding distinctive views on humans, ecosystems or the role of government, whereas the second related to the assumptions on natural relationships, such as ecological and/or human systems. The third element focused on the actors, their motives and the creation of story-lines and the fourth one considered the usage of metaphors and other rhetorical strategies.

Obviously, radical ecologism constitutes the argumentative basis of the ecological movement, whereas ethno-cultural rights (entangled with environmental rights) form the basic entity of the indigenous movement. The State's discourse relies on economism and is legitimized in the environmental discourse through references to environmentalism and socio-economic rights (welfare policies). The government's reasoning of considerate and ecologically sensible extractive politics clearly falls within the moral-philosophical categorical framework of environmental pragmatism and eco-socialism, albeit with a stance of 'ecological modernization' in its high belief in technology and environmental standards. Its discourse is accordingly a prime example of pragmatic anthropocentric type of environmentalist economism.

Government and ecological actors alike consider society dependent on nature, but the nature–society divide is not severely questioned. However, the ecological actors consider the current nature–society relationship much more fragile than the government, and they warn of the long-term consequences of extractivism. Meanwhile, despite that the indigenous movement's demands focus on ethno-cultural rights, its language has introduced a broader approach, at times close to the radical ecologist and post-anthropocentric visions. Among all three groups, post-anthropocentrism is referred to as a critique of the current societal model, but it remains a vague ideal and does not form an actual political goal.

The indigenous discursive concepts are historically rooted and are used as metaphors for culturally conscious ecological responsibility. These concepts – such as *Pachamama* and *Sumak Kawsay* – induce associations of morality, while neoliberalism is used as a metaphor of irresponsible, destructive policies. A practical challenge regarding the implementation of *Sumak Kawsay-Buen-Vivir* is its dependence on intellectual consensus from at least three fundamental models of thought, including clashing worldviews. We should reiterate, also, that many indigenous leaders defend elements of modernity and welfare reforms and in this sense consequently reaffirm the hegemonic developmentalist discourse.

Generally, the state and the indigenous and ecological movements are the exclusive actors that are given discursive agency. The expressed motives are used to create an image of righteousness of one's own position and a suspicious one of the adversary. When other groups are mentioned – such as 'the poor', 'the indigenous communities' and 'future generations' – they are referred to as passive objects without specific agency. The identification of 'helpless victims' is a powerful rhetorical tool, and so are the metaphors used.

Regardless of apparent differences, practically all of the scrutinized actors claim to represent environmentally progressive political left<sup>11</sup> and the political discourses rely on at least three shared premises. *First* is the desire to abandon the neoliberal legacy and to detach Ecuador from its economic dependency. *Second* is that extraction is considered as undesirable in itself and that the goal is to transform the society's economic structure. *A third characteristic* is the association of the ecological unsustainability with the contemporary Western way of living and resorting local indigenous cosmologies as sources providing alternatives to materialistic development.

Another crucial component of the discourses is the post-colonialist critique of the western modernity as the definition of good/desirable societal model. The discursive struggle over the meaning of *Sumak Kawsay* is one example, as also the sub-field of the rights of nature and the metaphor of nature (*Pachamama* as a female creature and mother, etc.) and human–nature relations. The discourse intends to paint the situation into black and white scenarios: water versus mining, Amazon or oil, concern for environment versus concern for the poor, and so forth.

The story-lines used by all actors include their specific symbols as well as heroes and villains. 'We are all Yasuní (*Todos somos Yasuní*)' tells the story of the people who are one with nature and stand against the government and capitalism, while the story of poverty-ridden Ecuador that makes a brave environmental proposal for international community highlights the government's efforts to struggle against the conditions of global capitalism. One of the indigenous story-lines connects to a broader history of European colonialism where the state is viewed merely as a continuum of colonial power (e.g. Becker, 2013). Told from another perspective, the state can be seen as the saviour of the poor and the hero that will finally finish with the 500 years of economic dependency.

An analytical and practical challenge amidst deliberative and discursive democracy is that the extractivist debate allows both advocates and adversaries of extraction to claim that they take environmental concerns seriously, while blaming the other for either idealism or negligence. The government can resort to an 'economistic pragmatic environmentalism', whereas the ecologist opposition can disregard the government's argumentation by stating the oxymoron of 'environmental-friendly extraction'. As a result, both proponents and opponents of extraction may claim they are right and reject the standpoint of the adversary.

While finishing this article the Rafael Correa presidential period ended and his former vice-president Lenin Moreno triumphed in the elections of 2 April 2017 as a representative of PAIS. A socio-political opening and dialogue with oppositional sectors characterized the first months of his presidency. One of his first meetings after taking office was with the indigenous movement. Moreover, Humberto Cholango,

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11 Notwithstanding, recently in 2016 a debate among oppositional indigenous actors emerged which questioned whether the indigenous movement automatically should be identified as leftist. See for example: Chuji (2016).



the former President of CONAIE, was nominated director of water in the Moreno cabinet. Nonetheless, this new dialogue-based strategy on behalf of Moreno and his criticism of the Correa administration have stirred a division of the PAIS movement into at least two factions, one led by Moreno and the other by Correa, who suddenly evolved into the harshest critic of the new president. Moreno likewise called for a popular consultation to be held on 4 February 2018.<sup>12</sup> The consultation includes seven questions regarding, among others, the elimination of the possibility of elected political authorities to get re-elected more than once, and the proposal to decrease the area of oil extraction in the Yasuní national park from 1.030 to 300 hectares and moreover to prohibit all kinds of mining activities in protected and intangible areas. Furthermore, after a meeting with CONAIE in December 2017, Moreno declared the ending of all new mining and oil concessions unless prior consultation with affected peoples is held according to the constitution. Nonetheless, whether the more open and dialogue-oriented approach of the Moreno government will bring back the eco-progressive profile of Ecuador still remains to be seen.

### Concluding remarks

The discursive struggle around the politico-environmental conflicts portrayed in this article is multifaceted. Beyond the concerns about nature and the climate from different ontological standpoints, these contentious debates are frequently closely linked to issues of indigenous/territorial rights, livelihoods and worldviews and interpretations of human–nature–society liaisons. The disputes of the Ecuadorian environmental conflict sprawl from the Amazonian jungle to the headquarters of Chinese investors, and touch the very core of the question of what constructs a just society that provides a better tomorrow for its people.

In this article, we have analysed and problematized the Ecuadorian paradox of environmental conflict in times of the administration of Rafael Correa, with a focus on the discourses expressed by state authorities and oppositional activists and spokespersons of the ecologist and indigenous movements, respectively. Leaning on a theoretical framing of argumentative (environmental) discourse analysis and three analytical dichotomies: – anthropocentrism vs. post-anthropocentrism, ecologism vs. environmentalism, and indigenous rights vs. socio-economic rights, which have been referred to directly or indirectly throughout the text – we have examined how (progressive) environmental questions and ecological concerns are perceived, defined and expressed in Ecuador.

The discourses on environmental politics and on the government's commitment to ecological concerns have turned into an argumentative struggle where both the actors in favour of extraction and the ones opposing it attempt to position their adversaries as

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12 Later, in January 2018, Correa and his most devoted followers withdrew from PAIS to organize as a new oppositional political movement.

unreliable or allies of the political right. Moreover, the three groups claim being the true champions of *Buen-vivir*. The debate is far from the ideals of deliberative ideals of argument-focused debate between equal parties, and instead resembles the discourse between activists and policy-makers, where each party questions not merely the arguments but the premises of the opposing discourse.

As illustrated throughout the analytical parts of the article, arguments are backed-up by emotionally appealing story-lines, which allow the proponents of each version of events to present itself as a noble hero fighting against an enemy bigger than himself. Indeed, the questions at stake cannot be considered trivial. Whether the main story is that of the state trying to eradicate human poverty, cultures struggling for their right of existence, the definition and implementation of the principles of *Buen-vivir*, or a collective's struggle to save the unique and globally significant Yasuní rainforest from destruction. The story looks different depending on the aspects of social reality included in each narrative, but all accounts highlight nature–human–society liaisons. The logics of ecology and economy may seem incompatible, and in this era of heightened environmental awareness and aggressive global capitalism, not only Ecuador is trapped within the conflict between ecologism and economism.

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